

# **“It's the same thing”**

## **the base metaphor of the Mescalero Apache**

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### **Introduction**

The Mescalero Apache have a very powerful metaphor at the base of their cosmology. In order to discuss it in this essay, I will first give some background on the tribe's origins, history, and traditional lifestyle. I will also contrast their worldview with that of the Euro-Americans who invaded their territory. Then I will discuss how their base metaphor is both flexible and consistent, allowing for cultural change without losing cultural identity.

### **Origins**

The Mescalero tribe of the American southwest were so-named by the Spanish for their practice of roasting and eating the mescal plant, an agave (*Sonnichsen 18-19*). White men are not certain how far back the tribe's history can be traced. The first mention of them as a separate people of the eastern Apache occurred in the eighteenth century (*Farrer 217*). The Mescalero though have oral tradition from “the beginning time” that is sung at the annual girl's puberty festival in July (*Farrer 135*).

### **Language**

Some scholars categorize the Mescalero as one branch of the eastern Apache, the other branch being the Jicarilla Apache (*Sonnichsen 294*). From language studies, it is believed that all the Apache, as well as the Navajo, are related to other speakers of Athapaskan languages. in Alaska and northwestern Canada. There is also a tribe that speaks an Athapaskan language on the northwest coast of California (*Hoijer 3*).

### **Migration**

Historical evidence seems to indicate that the Apache came down from the north and reached the southwestern United States sometime around the year 1500. They hunted buffalo on the plains, using dogs to pull their few possessions (*Farrer 212-215*). After taking horses from the Spanish, the hunting range of the Apache was greatly extended (*Sonnichsen 17*). The Apache lived in small bands that moved with the seasons and availability of resources. In the summer they went up to the mountains. In the winter they came down to the desert (*Sonnichsen 14*). They owed allegiance to no one and moved as they pleased (*Sonnichsen 4*).

### **Homes and clothing**

Traditional homes of the Mescalero Apache are simple brush shelters called wickiups. Traditional clothing was buckskin: a skirt and jumper for the women, a shirt and breechclout for the men. It wasn't until 1898 that the U.S. government was able to get Mescalero men into trousers, and it took force and persistence to do it (*Sonnichsen 16*). Most Mescalero today dress in the modern style. Traditional clothing is usually only worn by some for ceremonies or special occasions.

## Food

An Apache could find food where a white man would starve. This was demonstrated to the army officer John C. Cremony in the mid-nineteenth century. An Apache he was traveling with said there was food everywhere, then dug about six inches with his knife in what seemed to be bare earth to reveal a small tasty potato (*Cremony 296*).

## Camouflage

Apaches could also blend with their surroundings. Cremony describes how an Apache can cover himself with grass and make himself invisible in a field (*Cremony 189*). An Apache named Quick Killer demonstrates this ability to Cremony's astonishment (*Cremony, 290-291*). An Apache can cover himself with a gray blanket and with a sprinkling of dust appear to be a granite boulder (*Cremony, 189*). This lends credence to the stories of Geronimo (a Chiricahua Apache, closely related to the Mescalero Apache) standing still next to a mountain while U.S. cavalry troops rode right past without seeing him.

## Character

When they met the Mescalero, the white men encountered a people whose women were chaste (*Sonnichsen 117*) and whose warriors were brave and honest. It is unfortunate that, partly because of the ethnocentrism of the white men encountered by the Mescalero, there was such misunderstanding as to cause mistrust between the respective peoples.

## Worldview

Part of the problem lay in differing worldviews. The Mescalero, in common with many other Native American tribes, saw little value in work for work's sake. They were not acquisitive of material goods, partly because their nomadic existence limited how much they could acquire. They had a different sense of time. Where some Euro-Americans saw the Apache as lazy, some of the Apache saw Euro-Americans as working themselves to death, even as slaves to their work (*Sonnichsen 8-9*).

## Band organization

Another problem in cross-cultural contact was the Euro-American idea of leaders who could speak for a whole population. Mescalero Apache lived in small bands, usually but not necessarily kin-based (*Basehart 40*), that formed from the choice

of the individuals involved. Nobody could speak for another individual unless that individual consented to it, much less speak for another band or all the bands. Some Apaches felt it was unfair for them to be punished for breaking treaties to which they never personally agreed (*Sonnichsen 27*). Another major difference is the idea of communal access to resources, as opposed to the idea of private property so cherished by the Euro-Americans.

## Interactions with Euro-Americans

The Spanish had more success dominating the sedentary agricultural Pueblo peoples than the bands of free-ranging Apache. There was a large area of land the Spanish called *Apacheria* (*Sonnichsen 14*), empty except for the desert, mountains, and villages abandoned because of repeated Apache raids. Mexicans and Apaches stole children and livestock from each other (*Sonnichsen 39*). The Americans inherited this situation and made it worse because of the lack of a fair and consistent policy (*Sonnichsen 9*).

## Reservation history

For many years the Apache were free to raid at their discretion anybody crossing their territory. Finally, the Apache were herded into small reservations and forbidden to have public gatherings. This effectively stopped Mescalero tribal ceremonies from 1873 until 1913. The ban on public gatherings was lifted in 1912, but the Mescalero wanted to wait until their Chiricahua brothers (remnants of Geronimo's band held prisoner until this time) joined them at the Mescalero reservation. This was both to show respect for the Chiricahua and to have time to gather money and resources for a proper ceremony (*Farrer 134*).

## Bounded chaos

The Mescalero have adapted to reservation life but within the boundaries of what their culture believes it is to remain Apache. Farrer talks of modern mathematical theories of patterns within bounded chaos. She quotes James Gleick (*Chaos: Making a New Science*; Viking; New York; 1987. page 48) describing this situation as "locally unpredictable, globally stable" (*Farrer 106*).

## Chiasms

Farrer visualizes a dynamic multi-dimensional pattern of intersecting *chiasms*. A chiasm is a place where the Real World that is normally accessible only to shamans and people of power intersects with the Shadow World in which we live. Farrer quotes Gleick again (1987:160) to further describe a chiasm as "where there is a phase transition or a boundary 'between two realms of existence'" (*Farrer 108*).

## Where chiasms occur

Chiasms can be people, places, or events. They occur at particular places and times. People can be unaware of them. Glimpses of the Real World also occur at appropriate ceremonies. A chiasm is opened by a Libayé (ritual clown) dancer

with conflicting advertising slogans painted on his body (for example) at the girls' puberty ceremony. The people are given an opportunity to examine their values, material ones as well as spiritual ones, and decide amongst themselves what acceptable behavior is for an Apache to remain Apache (*Farrer 111-116*).

## “the same thing”

Cultures must change or they become stagnant and die. On the other hand, too much change is chaos. One must have balance. For the Mescalero Apache, the base metaphor helps them put change in perspective. When Farrer asked some Mescalero people about certain aspects of their culture, she “...had been told that the base metaphor was ‘the same thing’ as Creation, which was ‘the same thing’ as the Holy Lodge, which was ‘the same thing’ as politeness—and on, and on” (43). This did not make sense to her until she understood how their base metaphor could be extended and transformed to cover virtually all aspects of Mescalero Apache life.

## The base metaphor

The *base metaphor* is a quartered circle, with the axes representing the daily movement of the sun east to west and its annual movement south to north (*Farrer 57-58*). Sound and silence complement each other (28). Balance and harmony are expressed in circularity (29). However, these are only partial meanings. It represents much more than that. There are four directions. The number four is sacred to the Mescalero, being the number of days of creation (26). Four is an even number and therefore balanced, another key concept for them. Each of the directions has seasons, animals, and character traits associated with it (30-31). Traveling around the circle can also represent the four stages of life, as enacted by the girls in their puberty ceremony. This all ties in with the Mescalero cosmology and mythology. The girls re-enact the role of White Painted Woman, a key figure in Mescalero creation stories (*Farrer 152*).

## Mescalero Apachean Metaphors

The traditional Mescalero Apache did not use writing. Their base metaphor is a visual one, not a verbal one. It is a symbolic representation of their perception of how the universe works (*Farrer 31-32*). Another example of non-verbal metaphors in traditional Mescalero culture is the trickster personified as Coyote, an animal. Their children received practical instruction by listening to the Coyote cycle of stories (*Sonnichsen 31*).

## Examples in everyday life

Nearly everything the Mescalero do can be related to their base metaphor. They season their salt in a clockwise circle and many people add two perpendicular axes when they do this to complete the visual representation of the base metaphor (*Farrer 63*). On pages 65-73 of *Living Life's Circle*, Farrer describes a tribal council meeting where the seating locations, order of speaking, and even the structure of their speeches all relate to the base metaphor.

## Basketry designs

Mescalero basketry uses designs of which most outsiders do not understand the cultural meaning. Many of these designs are derived from the base metaphor. Stars, suns, mountains, and crescent moons can all be drawn by simple geometric extensions and transformations of the base metaphor (*Farrer 96-99*). Of course all these figures have their own meaning in Mescalero culture, but at some level they are all “the same thing.”

## Influence on cultural change

Farrer points out that when one speaks of “traditional” culture, one needs to specify the time and place (238). For example, the “traditional” Mescalero culture of 1300 is different from that of 1700 and very different from today, yet somehow still “the same thing.” All living cultures change constantly. The difference with the Mescalero Apache is their base metaphor and how it influences the choices they make as a people. Its influence may not necessarily be at the conscious level. When one is raised as a Mescalero, the cultural values become such a part of you that when something doesn't fit the base metaphor it leaves one with a vague sense of unease or worse.

## Conclusion

The post-contact history of the Mescalero Apache has been a troubled one, and their traditional lifestyle has changed. It is possible that the base metaphor of the Mescalero Apache has helped and will continue to help them preserve their identity as a people. The base metaphor's apparent paradox of being flexible yet consistent helps the Mescalero Apache adapt to change without losing their culture. I will close with a formal term, Daaiinaa [this/here it ends].

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